UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

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THE MEDIA AND THE UNITED NATIONS

The role of the media in shaping today's world as well as why the media do not adequately cover the activities of the United Nations were the main issues discussed by a panel of media experts from the United Nations and the press at large, featuring Dan Rather, Managing Editor and Anchor of CBS Evening News.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is a special edition of **World Chronicle**.

Today our topic is the role of the media in diplomacy. There's no doubt that with the advancement of modern information technologies the world has become a global village. Today there are no information barriers; what happens in one corner of the world can instantly be seen and heard the world over. How does this information revolution shape international diplomacy?

With me today to discuss these questions are Dan Rather, Managing Editor and Anchor of CBS Evening News; Samir Sanbar, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information; Raghida Dergham, Senior Diplomatic Correspondent for Al Hayat of London; and Nadia Younes, Director of the Media Division in the UN Department of Public Information.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

RATHER: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rather, your predecessor, Walter Cronkite, was credited through his reporting with having shortened the Vietnam War. President Johnson is alleged to have said that if he'd lost Walter Cronkite he'd lost the country. That is perhaps a very unusual situation. What do you think is really the impact of the media on international diplomacy and politics?

RATHER: First of all, I'm glad to be with you today. I welcome this opportunity to have this discussion. The media's role, when it is at its most effective, is the role of an honest broker of information. It is less effective when it has some axe to grind, some opinion to put forward. I think this is particularly true, Michael, in the 1990s, perhaps much truer in the 1990s than it was in the late 1960s, when the quotation from President Johnson to which you refer was made. And here's why: that people world-wide, not just in the United States of America, not just in the more developed industrialized nations, are much more sophisticated about the media; they know much more about what it is we do, how we do it; if you like, they're much harder to fool, they're much, much harder to deceive than they ever were before. So when we perform the service – and I do think it's a public service – of being honest brokers of information, I think we're very effective. Decreasingly so, when we give our opinions. I frankly think that most people, and this is on a world-wide basis, may be interested in what a Dan Rather has to report bearing

witness to events and personages in the news, but when it comes to my opinion, I think my opinion is not worth any more than the guy at the end of the bar.

DERGHAM: But aren't you accusing the media of really choosing certain issues to highlight and ignoring other issues? For example, in the American media there is a lot of talk about not taking care of the foreign story, that it's always the local story. Are we, the media, then playing a role in shaping the agenda of what the diplomats or the politicians should be interested in or not?

RATHER: I think the answer is yes. I think that criticism is valid. I do not except myself from this criticism. Having said that, however, I think that this could be very easily taken out of proportion to the reality. By selecting what stories we use and don't use, it has an inevitable effect on the agenda. That's true. It is also true that in my own country – I'm sorry to say, I regret this very much – that in the post-Communist era there has been a diminution of attention to international news, what we used to call foreign news. I'm happy to say we now call it international news. There has been diminution of this. This has not been for the better. So the following points are true. Yes, by selection of stories, even when we are at our best, when we're at our objective best, trying to squeeze out our own biases, our own nationalistic or even regionalistic biases, when we're at our best, we do help set the agenda. We either cover or we don't cover starving children in Somalia; we either emphasize or don't emphasize the tragedy that is Bosnia. However, I believe that our power is more limited in this area than most of us in the media are willing to acknowledge. But I don't want to leave this subject without acknowledging that what you say is true, and I'm very much concerned about it for my own country, that at the very moment in history when the world is becoming more internationalized, more interdependent, that the United States of America, for reasons that I explained before – it's not an excuse, but an explanation; we've moved into the post-Soviet era, the post-Communist era – that there's less emphasis on international coverage. International coverage is more expensive; it's more complicated; it takes more time to explain; it's – Oscar Wilde said "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." Well, this is particularly true of international affairs. So all of these things come together at the very moment when my own country, I believe, needs to be more international in its outlook. We have become somewhat more inward in our outlook, and that is reflected in media coverage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Samir Sanbar?

SANBAR: Oh, I think international affairs grows on you. It's an issue where you get involved in it, then you get more involved in it, and you get to meet more people and

you'd be interested more. And I think the more there is coverage of international affairs the more interest there will be in that. And for us in the United Nations, I think one of the basic duties, if you wish, is to try to construct these – strengthen these alliances between American television personalities and maybe other television personalities around the world, and other international personalities, whereby there is more interest and more knowledge about the subject.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you feel that the media in the United States or in the developed countries as a whole give the UN a fair shake?

SANBAR: Well, they do their best to cover stories. And I think it's a double responsibility. We have to provide them with stories of interest to them, and they may have to make a bigger effort to look at UN stories. But basically I think it's an effort on both sides. All of us have to make an effort to make the UN more relevant to everyday life. The UN deals with almost every aspect of human life today. Although many people may not realize it, regulating airline traffic is ICAO; the World Bank does banking; the World Health Organization does health questions, confronting disease, malnutrition. It's an open field everywhere about the UN system. And maybe the more the media knows about this, the more we are able to present in the UN system, all our colleagues together, a more practical story, a more relevant story of what we have, maybe the media would be more interested in what we are doing. But at the same time they may also consider showing more interest in these UN activities.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much attention do you pay on the CBS Evening News to the United Nations?

RATHER: The honest answer is not much.

DERGHAM: You don't even have a correspondent here.

RATHER: I beg your pardon?

DERGHAM: Does CBS have a permanent correspondent?

RATHER: Not a permanent full-time correspondent. We did. We no longer have this. I do want to go back to something that my friend Mr. Sanbar said. He's a United Nations diplomat and he's being very diplomat. But I think, again, the candid answer to your question, has there been a diminution in the coverage of the United Nations, is the United Nations treated fairly in coverage, I think the answer to the first is yes, there has been a diminution in coverage of the United Nations, and no, it is not fair. As President Kennedy once said in another context, life is not fair, and we all understand this, but I think that we should – Mr. Sanbar acknowledged that he's being very diplomatic. But in our journalistic souls, at our core, we know this to be true. And, by the way, let me

pause and say I do not except myself from this criticism. Coverage of the United Nations has in some ways gone out of fashion in the United States. I'm not telling you what I would like to be true, I am trying to bear witness to what I believe to be an accurate assessment of the situation.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why has it gone out of fashion?

RATHER: Well, I wish I knew the full answer to that. But I think one of the reasons is something we touched on before. When the United States of America, when the Government and the people of the United States of America felt real and present danger – whether they should have or not, the fact is they did, for half a century, beginning with the end of World War II, felt a danger from a different ideology – when the, quote, "Soviet menace", when the cold war was at its height, there was a self-interest in being interested in the United Nations. There was for the American people, there was for the American Government, and therefore there was for the American press. Now, this is not the only reason, but it is among the major reasons, that once you had the dissolution of this Soviet empire, that threat, real or imagined, faded into the mists. So that's one reason. But there are other reasons. And again, one hesitates to know how candidly to discuss this, but the only way I know is straightforwardly, that there have always been pressures and forces in the United States, as there are in most countries of the world, who, for their own partisan political and/or partisan ideological reasons have been opposed to the United Nations. This I do not intend to be a criticism per se; they are entitled to their viewpoint, and at least as seen in their own minds and hearts they have a valid argument. Well, in the beginning of the UN, when hopes were high and the need was perceived as being very high, these forces in my own country, these forces who said, listen, we don't need a United Nations, we fear a, quote, "world government", and so forth, they were small and in decline. Now, when the exterior threat that was our focus for so long has faded into these mists, these forces have gained strength. They also have been working for 50 years. So I think it would be unrealistic not to acknowledge that these forces exist in my own country, as they do in many other countries of the world, and this has an effect on the press. There's pressure. "Why do you pay attention to the UN? All they ever do up there is debate." Quote, unquote. Or, "Listen, the UN's a terribly expensive place, you know. They're very wasteful." Quote, unquote. All of these pressures are something that every journalists feels. I'm not blaming that entirely, but I think it would be, as I say, unrealistic not to acknowledge that it exists.

LITTLEJOHNS: Nadia, you want to respond to that?

YOUNES: Yes. I would like to move beyond the blame and laying of the blame and get into specifics. I work for the United Nations, I work for the Media Division. I'm very interested to know, we know that there is a diminution all around of international news in America, the US and so on. What I want to know more from you, since we're lucky enough to have you around this table, what exactly would interest you from the United Nations? Is it the news aspect of the United Nations? Is it the kind of debate that is going on today with all the foreign ministers, all the heads of State here? Is that what you would find interesting? Or is the more groundwork that is being done in the field, in the areas which Samir was discussing, which are health, education? What really – you, who has to make those difficult choices, what is it that you would like to see coming out of the UN?

RATHER: More of the latter than the former.

YOUNES: Okay.

RATHER: I'm not expressing my own personal desire here, but we're dealing with how does the United Nations get more attention? What would get additional coverage? What would get expanded coverage? And unfortunately – again there's no joy in saying this – television in particular is action oriented. Television is great at some things. We're terrific at some things. But television has difficulty with depth. And as one of my mentors, the late Eric Severeid, once said, you cannot take a picture of an idea, and therefore ideas are difficult for television to deal with. So, when the UN is – if the UN is to get anywhere near what you, Michael, might say is their fair share of coverage, I think any time that access can be given, people can be shown action on the ground, everything from "Here are landmines, and here's what the debate about landmines is about," to "Here is why you should care about whether what used to be Yugoslavia remains in flames of war or not", any time you can be on the ground, supply a picture, that's to the UN's advantage.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is a special edition of **World Chronicle**. With me today are Dan Rather, Managing Editor and Anchor of CBS Evening News; Samir Sanbar, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information; Raghida Dergham, Senior Diplomatic Correspondent for Al Hayat of London; and Nadia Younes, Director of the Media Division in the UN Department of Public Information. Nadia, would you like to follow up on that?

YOUNES: Well, I'm interested in what you're saying, but I'd like to just further the question a little bit. So you would be – you think that where we would have an edge is to make human and to make alive the kind of operations we have in the field?

RATHER: Yes. And with that, always to have in mind that when you seek press coverage – I prefer the word "press" as opposed to media, so forgive me if you will – but when the UN seeks that, take into consideration, what is the self interest? Why should any American care about what's happening in Bosnia, in Somalia, with landmines or what have you? Because what I find – as one who struggles with this I have no complaints; I'm lucky and blessed to have this work, so I'm not complaining – but what we struggle with when we're talking about coverage and diminution of coverage or expansion of coverage, my experience is that when you can explain to people why they should care, particularly when you can show them why they should care, they begin to care. Let me give you a specific example, and this will be quick, Michael, because I know our time is short here. When we went to China in 1989, and we went for several reasons, ostensibly there was a Gorbachev visit to China, but beyond that our nose for news said to us, something is happening within China. We couldn't put our finger on it, but we thought something is bubbling up from below. So we went. When Tiananmen Square began developing, when the student protests began – now, let's set aside whether one agrees or disagrees with what the Chinese Government did – from a news coverage standpoint, something of tremendous importance was beginning to happen in China. Here's the point. When we first went to China in the early spring of 1989, if you took to one of these shopping malls a list of 35 stories and asked people, "What story are you interested in?", China would probably have been number 38, out of 35. But when we went there and we began to show people and explain to people, "Listen, students are concerned about the following things, and this movement is building", fairly quickly it sprang to number one, which is rare for any international story.

Now, I use this example, see, what's – if nobody had gone to China, if no television had been in China, it would remain number 38 in interest, but once you go, and if – here's the point – if you can connect with the viewer, "Here's why you should care about this. It may be a long way away..."... We have a rather cynical saying in news, you know, in American news, "Well, it's a long way from Broadway", which is to say, it's over there somewhere, so who cares about it? But Americans – and I don't want to confine this to Americans, I think anybody in the world – if you can, show them why they should care. What happens with us and where I fault us so often is that we fail to provide that reason. Now, to your question. If you work for the United Nations, or care about the United Nations, or you want additional coverage, it is always to have in the forefront of your brain, "How can we connect with the viewer and have them understand why they should care?"

DERGHAM: There's a problem there, Dan. You know that it's quite often that we in the media say, well, you see, the public is not interested. The public does not want that story, that it does not concern him or her. And yet, we know that to your – for example, in television in your studios, you get a lot of footage that could be quite interesting to attract the public to be interested in it, and it's not used. What happens, I think, there is a bit of a glorification of the role of White House correspondent, if you will, those who are hand-in-glove with the United States Government officials, if you will, and in effect I think –

LITTLEJOHNS: Hand-in-glove? That's a rather hard statement.

DERGHAM: Quite a number of correspondents in Washington, I find, they have somehow relied on that spoon-feeding because it's convenient, it's easier, and you have good contacts with the officials, and you get a better story, and you get the off-the-record, and it's ratings. I wonder, where is the responsibility amongst the journalists? Is it like with Dan Rather deciding what goes on the news broadcast in the evening, or is it with the sub-editors –

RATHER: No.

DERGHAM: – on the desk, you know, people on the desk, who say, yes, you cover the story or you don't?

RATHER: No. There's so much in this question, I hardly know where to begin. No, because it's a rich question, and it's a rich field. But right from the top let me pause and say – and about this you and I may disagree, but I don't want there to be any misunderstanding about this – I'm an American, I'm an American in my very being, and I'm very proud of my country, and I'm especially proud of the free press. That may sound to some like being preachy, but I feel obliged to say it. The American press is by far the most independent in the world. Listen, Americans are not perfect, we're not the best at everything, we're not even best at all the things we think we're best at, but we do have the freest press in the world. Now, that's important as a base. By and large, American reporters such as myself, and about this I would include myself, are independent, fiercely so, and the worst thing you can say about any American journalist who is worthy of the name is that he or she is hand-in-glove with powers that be. Because I do feel a responsibility. I'm in journalism because I want to be in public service, not just to the United States of America, to which I am without apology loyal, but, you know, to decent people and movements the world over. That's why I'm in journalism. I want to be in public service. However it may appear. I didn't get in it for the money, I didn't get in it to be a star, I got in it because I want to be of service.

Now, I think the best way I can be of service is to be able to serve truth – again, I know this sounds sort of corny, but that's what's in now. I know from my own experience that there's no way that I can be this honest broker of information, an honest pursuer of truth, if I'm not prepared to question power. It's not a matter of speaking truth to power – that's a very important role for a citizen – but, as a journalist, to question power. Now, I spent 10 years as a White House correspondent, and I made my mistakes. And sometimes I made the kinds of mistakes that you described.

DERGHAM: We all do.

RATHER: But it was very important for listeners and viewers world-wide to understand that American journalists, not confined to American journalists, but American journalists are trying to be independent, with a capital "I". Now, what happens – that's part of your question. I think the more – I know the more troubling part of your question to me is the self-centredness of American press coverage. Again, about this, we have much to answer – for which we have much to answer. But it's the rare country on a world-wide basis that is not self-centred to some degree. Now, what's happened in American journalism – and again I do not except myself from this criticism – is that with the passing of the Soviet threat, real or imagined – I happen to think it was real, but however you come out on that – is that we have become more inward. And this has encouraged journalists to take the easy way. I have said that people will become interested in China, Bosnia, Somalia, if you show them some reason. But it's much simpler to take the latest police blotter case, to take the latest murder. It's easier to draw an audience with that, it's much simpler. So, too often, in this world and this longer-than-I'd-hoped-for answer, too often we take the easy way, and it's easier to take the easy way now, if you will pardon that syntax, than it used to be. Because there's less reason – I won't say less reason – you don't have the huge enemy threatening the country, or at least the perception of that. So it's easy. But I think the core of your criticism is justified, and I would say in American newsrooms there's more discussion of our responsibility in this area than I can ever remember in my 45 years-plus.

DERGHAM: That's good.

LITTLEJOHNS: Samir?

SANBAR: Well, I think that's admirable, because we all live in New York, and we watch of course the news on television. We wonder sometimes how do they decide on one news item or the other. But true, this is a very free press area, and we in the UN of course try to encourage free and varied press around the world. We have seminars

around the world in all the regions to highlight the role of free and varied press. So I think this is a very important –

LITTLEJOHNS: Are they successful, these seminars? Do they encourage more interest in the United Nations and coverage of the United Nations? You're speaking of journalistic seminars?

SANBAR: Yes, yes. Though not just in the United Nations, but in the free delivery of press work, knowing how to do their work, in areas which have not really had lots of free press for a while. And it's good to encourage them, and more important that they build a cadre of journalists, young journalists, who are starting to get used to the role of the media and to free and varied press.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Rather, you attended Princess Diana's funeral in London, and of course there's been a lot of criticism and controversy about the role of the paparazzi. What's your view about the intrusion into private grief and private activities by the paparazzi and by the tabloid press in general, particularly the supermarket tabloids?

RATHER: I abhor it. Again, I'm not going to try to slice it. Having said that, it's very important that people understand, not every attorney is an ambulance-chaser; not every physician is one who engages in malpractice; and not every journalist believes in maximum intrusion in the private lives of even public people. Again, there is some introspection about this now, and there's discussion about it, which I think is healthy. We have a code of ethics. You know, those who are on the road need a code. Those who are on the road of journalism need a code. And part of my own code is that I want to be very sensitive to the feelings of the people I come across in covering the news. It's sometimes hard to keep that in mind. And I've made my own mistakes. But I don't want to leave any doubt that I think that one needs to respect to a certain degree the privacy of all people. Now, people who seek publicity are entitled to perhaps less privacy than those who do not seek publicity, and I think it's very obvious. One of the struggles, when you talk about Princess Diana, is that on the one hand she sought publicity, she used publicity; on the other hand, she sought to limit it. That's difficult to do, and as a journalist I say it's difficult for us to hear that. Once you begin to seek publicity, then you give up a certain amount of your privacy. A certain amount, not all of it.

LITTLEJOHNS: Could you see yourself using on one of your programmes any of the pictures that were taken by the paparazzi of the tragic crash?

RATHER: I would love to tell you no, absolutely no, under no circumstances. I can't in truth tell you that. I can say that I would have no interest in it. But if someone came, even now, and said, "We have these photographs..." – we don't pay for such

photographs, mind you -- but "We have these photographs, and you're free to use them", I would be under tremendous pressure to use some of them. And I can't in truth say to you that I could resist those pressures completely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this special edition of **World Chronicle**.

With me today were Dan Rather, Managing Editor and Anchor of CBS Evening News; Samir Sanbar, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information; Raghida Dergham, Senior Diplomatic Correspondent for Al Hayat of London; and Nadia Younes, Director of the Media Division in the UN Department of Public Information.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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